

THE IMPACT OF NON-ACADEMIC ACTIVITIES ON STUDENT MENTAL HEALTH

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Introduction

"Education is not preparation for life; education is life itself." — John Dewey

We have become so conditioned by expectations of success that students often believe their sole purpose is to study—forgetting that life is meant to be lived, not just measured by grades. If education is truly life, then learning should reach beyond textbooks, embracing joy, new experiences, challenges, and social connections.

Acceptance into top universities and future employment has become increasingly competitive pushing students to put life aside and focus on endless studying. However, this lifestyle guarantees neither a healthy mind and life nor professional success. Learning how to balance life is a crucial skill students must learn, and adult guidance in the process is necessary to prevent becoming overwhelmed.

The purpose of this research is to examine how participation in non-academic activities may influence students' mental health and well-being. By analyzing survey responses and case study interviews, it aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of the role that these experiences play in student development. This study was conducted with students of the Universal American School in Dubai, as participants.

Literature Review

Involvement in non-academic activities has been shown to have a positive impact on students' personal development and academic growth. Studies indicate that participation in these programs promotes critical thinking and improves problem-solving while offering practical applications of classroom concepts (Ginosyan et al., 2020). Additionally, extracurricular engagement develops character by building discipline, teamwork, social responsibility, and independence (Sosiden and Viraek, 2021). Students involved in these activities developed leadership and communication skills crucial for both academic performance and future careers. Mental health benefits are also noted, as afterschool programs can foster safe and supportive environments, reduce stress and anxiety, as well as enhance interpersonal skills, self-confidence, and emotional stability (Afterschool Alliance, 2024; National Center for Education Statistics, 1995).

However, research warns about the risk of burnout due to overcommitment and difficulty balancing academic responsibilities with extracurricular activities (Caetano, 2021; University of Georgia Study). Overscheduling could lead to anxiety and mental health struggles. Support from teachers and parents is crucial to the success of these activities and to guide students to gain the full benefit while preventing burnout.

Overall, literature suggests that participation in non-academic activities contributes significantly to students' personal growth and well-being and that proper adult guidance and support can help maintain balance and prevent the risk of burnout.

Methodology

Participants in this study included 152 students from grades 10–12, 15 to 18 years old, equal number of boys and girls, at the Universal American School in Dubai, 70 girls and 82 boys. Participants were informed about the research goals during the morning announcements and were given the option to complete a

digital survey, annexed at the end. Two case study students (one senior male and one female graduate) were selected based on their extensive engagement in extracurricular activities. This case study approach was chosen to provide deeper qualitative insights that complement the quantitative survey data. Their experiences provided deeper insights into the mental and emotional impacts of non-academic participation.

Findings and Analysis

This section presents the key findings of the surveys and key quotes from the interviewed students in four categories: Participation in Non-Academic Activities; Emotional Well-Being and Mental Health Benefits; Skills Developed Through Non-Academic Activities; and Risks of Overwhelm and Stress from Imbalance.

1.Participation in Non-Academic Activities

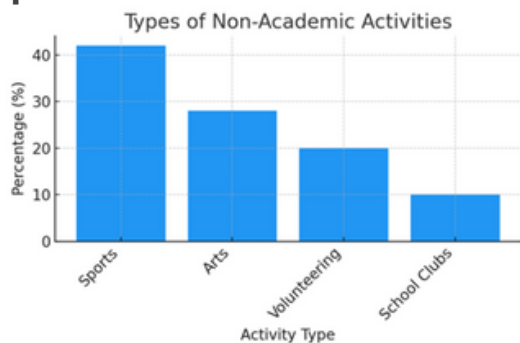
The survey revealed that 74% of students actively participate in non-academic activities, (see **Figure 1**), sports and arts being the most frequent ones (see **Figure 2**), and enjoyment and skill development being the most important reasons for participation.

"When I'm acting or helping out, I feel like I actually matter—not just my test scores."
"I've always been a part of theatre. It's not just about acting, it's about feeling connected... It wasn't just a play; it was a community."
"I got into basketball because I loved the competition and the feeling of the team... It's knowing that every game, people are counting on me"

Figure 1
Student Participation in Non-Academic Activities



Table 2
Types of Student Participation in Non-Academic Activities



2. Emotional Well-Being and Mental Health Benefits

The survey showed that non-academic activities can enhance students' mental health and emotional well-being (see **Figure 3** and **4**). The results revealed that through these activities they relieved stress, found emotional balance, learned resilience, and found a purpose beyond academic work (see **Figure 5**).

Figure 3
Influence on Mood and Emotional Well-being

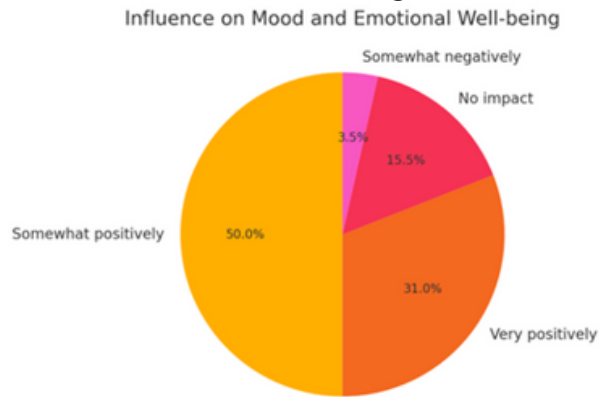


Figure 4
Impact of Activities on Stress Levels



"When I'm involved in activities, I feel less stressed. It's like an escape where I can just be myself."

"Theatre gave me a place to express myself without judgment. It's freedom."

"Theatre is my escape...I forget about the stress of school. It's just about the moment, the people, and the experience."

"Basketball is my therapy... (it) lets me burn off the stress and just be in the moment."

3. Skills Developed Through Non-Academic Activities

Of the students who participated in the research project, 86% reported having gained life skills due to their involvement in non-academic activities (see **Figure 5**), being high on the list: teamwork and time management (see **Figure 6**).

Figure 5
Do Skills Benefit Beyond School?

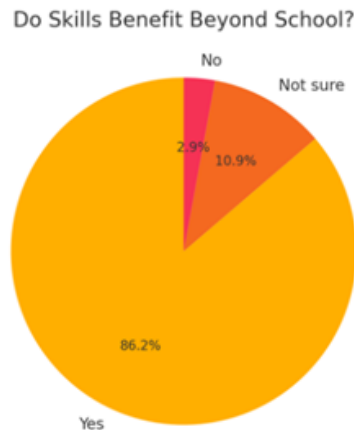
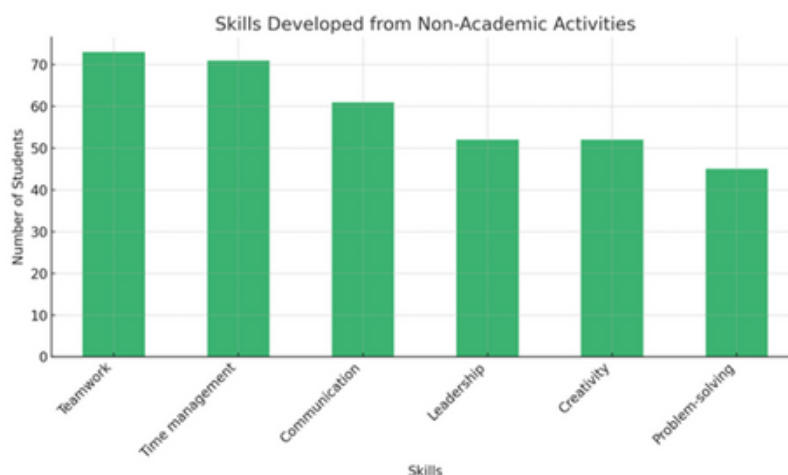


Figure 6
Skills Developed from Non-Academic Activities



"When I'm busy with soccer or volunteering, I actually plan my time better for school too."

"I can now juggle more than I thought I could because of the practice I got through these activities."

"Running productions taught me communication and organization. I had to work with different people, call vendors, and make sure things were on time. It's more than just theatre; it's learning how to manage real projects."

"Basketball taught me discipline. If I miss a practice, I feel it in the game. It's helped me learn to be accountable and stay committed."

4. Risks of Overwhelm and Stress from Imbalance

While the benefits of non-academic activities were clear in most of the responses in both the survey and interview, they also revealed that students might be at risk of feeling overwhelmed and struggling to balance their academic responsibilities with their non-academic activities. Over 11% of the respondents felt an increase in stress (see **Figure 7**), 3.5% were influenced negatively by their involvement in non-academic activities (see **Figure 8**), and 73% of them felt overwhelmed when balancing their different activities (see **Figure 9**).

Figure 7
Impact of Activities on Stress Levels



Figure 8
Influence on Mood and Emotional Well-being

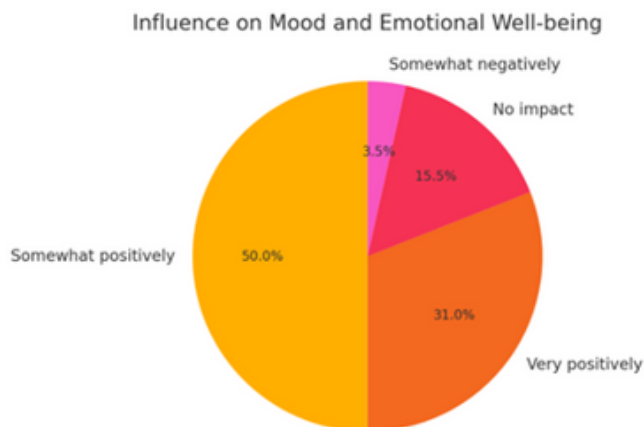
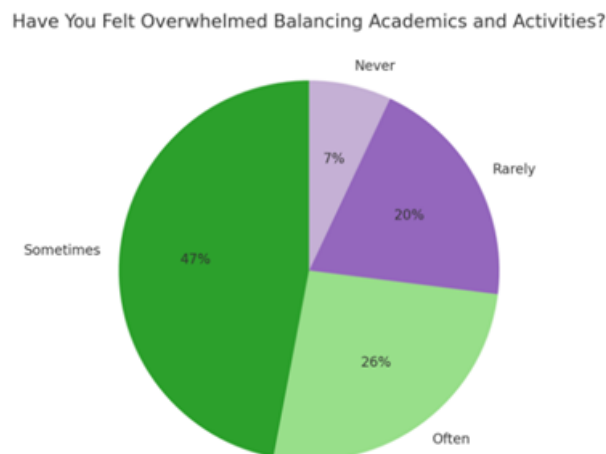


Figure 9
Balancing Academics and Activities



"Sometimes it gets overwhelming — like I'm doing everything at once. School, football, volunteering... I don't even have time to breathe."

"I love being part of everything, but there are days when it just feels like too much."

"In my final year, I tried to juggle too many responsibilities—...I loved it, but I also felt burnt out by the end."

"There were times when basketball and school deadlines would clash. I remember staying up late after practice, trying to finish assignments, barely getting any sleep. It catches up to you."

Discussion and Reflections

1. The Positive Impact of Non-Academic Engagement on Mental Health

Evidence from both the literature and the data collected confirm that non-academic activities support mental health and emotional well-being. These activities help develop the essential soft skills necessary for life and personal growth such as teamwork, collaboration, resilience, risk-taking, time management, and many more (Ginosyan et al., 2020; Sosiden and Viraek, 2021). However, when not well balanced, it can lead to burn-out, stress and a feeling of being overwhelmed (Caetano, 2021).

Consistent with the findings of the Afterschool Alliance (2024) and the National Center for Education Statistics (1995), who highlighted the stress-reducing and identity-promoting aspects of structured activities, students reported that the non-academic activities served as an outlet for stress, emotional expression, and mental balance. They felt that belonging to a sports team, a drama group or a club provided them with a safe space and gave them a rest from academic pressure. This aligns with the literature that states that structured activities can reduce anxiety and promote positive identity (Afterschool Alliance, 2024) and highlights how engagement leads to stronger mental health (National Center for Education Statistics, 1995). Given the clear benefits of non-academic activities for youth's mental health, should schools view them as part of mental health support within the well-being programs, not just "extras"?

2. Development of Essential Life Skills Through Extracurricular Involvement

Ginosyan et al. (2020) found that extracurricular activities develop critical thinking and problem solving. Sosiden and Viraek (2021) argued that structured experiences promote teamwork and self-discipline. The development of crucial life skills through extracurricular engagement, as reported by 86% of students in this study (including time management, leadership, and teamwork), directly supports the research by Ginosyan et al. (2020) on the development of critical thinking and problem-solving. Sosiden and Viraek's (2021) argument regarding the promotion of teamwork and self-discipline. Students also expressed that emotional resilience was a result of working in groups, overcoming challenges, and persevering in long-term projects.

3. The Challenge of Balance and the Risk of Burnout

Adult support and guidance are crucial to ensure an enjoyable and productive participation in non-academic activities because students do not always know how to prioritize and balance their school responsibilities, family and social commitments and their non-academic activities, leading to anxiety and burn-out. Caetano (2021) argued that overscheduling without proper support leads to burnout and mental exhaustion, and the University of Georgia Study showed how overcommitting can heighten anxiety. The significant percentage of students (73%) reporting feelings of being overwhelmed underscores the concerns raised by Caetano (2021) and the University of Georgia Study regarding the risks of overscheduling and burnout. The question that arises is how do schools and parents, support young people in prioritizing? Should schools provide mentorship or time-management workshops to help students balance?

4. The Role of Schools and Parents in Fostering Healthy Engagement

The findings of this study, combined with existing literature, emphasize the crucial role of both schools and parents in guiding students towards a balanced involvement in non-academic activities. Without proper support, the very activities intended to enhance well-being can become sources of stress.

Limitations of the Study

26% of the students responded that they did not participate in non-academic activities. Upon informal follow-up questions with students, some expressed having assumed the activities were the ones offered by the school only. Further research could explore in more detail the reasons why students gave these responses to properly determine their involvement, and to determine solutions or opportunities for them, as some expressed not having parent permission, not being interested in any of the activities the school offered, or not having time due to the academic demands.

The initial intention of the study was to include the impact participation in non-academic activities had on academic performance. However, the data to support this was incomplete, and long-term research would be needed to compare it before and after involvement, as well as including a control group. It could be interesting to investigate the results of these students further on in their college studies and to see if the impact remains solid.

When conducting the study, the hypothesis was that in fact non-academic activities do have a positive impact on well-being. However, in the process of reading both the literature and the student responses, more negative impact than expected was found, because of burnout and anxiety. This raised the question if there were more reasons to study the potential effects of not making the team, not getting the role in the school play, letting team members down, etc.

Recommendations

Structured and balanced extracurricular activities benefit students in many ways. In our findings, students wanted more options, further support (particularly in sports and arts) as well as volunteer and real-world experiences. They even suggested that more activities could be student led. Their concerns with the activities are a lack of variety, accessibility, and scheduling. Schools should provide spaces to address the concerns of students who felt that there was a lack of choice in activities or on how they could be assisted in balancing their time. Parents should also encourage open communication with their children about their commitments and help them prioritize more effectively.

Conclusion

The literature review and the finding of the research both conclude that student participation in non-academic activities can improve mental health and emotional well-being, as they can relieve stress, develop skills, and promote a sense of purpose and belonging. Participation in these activities also provides an opportunity for the development of soft skills essential in their future careers and lives, such as time management, resilience, teamwork and leadership.

However, even though the research shows an undeniable benefit of these activities, stress, anxiety, and burnout may also result due to young people not knowing how to balance their lives, prioritize their activities and deal with the emotions linked to success and failure in these activities. To alleviate these negative outcomes of non-academic activities, it is crucial that students have the support of adults in their lives, parents, teachers, coaches, and mentors, to guide them in these processes.

Schools should integrate activities of this nature in their well-being programs,

and not see them as “extra”, but as a necessary component of the school culture. Ultimately, for education to truly embody “life itself,” as Dewey expressed, this study emphasizes the necessity of a balanced approach that integrates meaningful non-academic engagement alongside academic pursuits, ensuring students live and enjoy the present and develop into well-rounded individuals.

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